

Five lessons about Fare-Free Public Transport

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Source: Anna Wyner

Cycling and Fare-Free Transit are compatible solutions!

With a growing pool of 38 fare-free public transport (FFPT) networks running in 2023, France is an active player in the field as evidenced by the existence of a national dedicated observatory: L'Observatoire des villes du transport gratuit (Observatory of Cities with Fare-Free Public Transport). During a study trip in the Paris region last March, we had the opportunity to meet Julie Calnibalosky, scientific coordinator at the Observatory. Here are five main take-aways from her presentation:

SUMMARY

1. The lack of monitoring and evaluation tools at the local level regarding fare-free public transport (FFPT) policy makes the work being done by the French Observatory of Cities with Fare-Free Public Transport even more essential to ground the debate in data.
2. FFPT policy has many applications in cities of all sizes and political backgrounds.
3. An FFPT policy alone cannot solve every urban mobility issue. To be efficient in the long term, fare-free policy must be part of a proactive public transport development policy.
4. Its ease of use means FFPT policy can induce a change in mobility and represents a concrete solution to mobility poverty, especially for the most affected users such as elderly and youth.
5. The benefits but also losses induced by FFPT must be weighted according to the local context.

Building up a factual knowledge base to go beyond ideological representations

Under the guidance of a multidisciplinary and independent scientific committee composed by mobility experts and researchers, the Observatory of Cities with Fare-Free Public Transport aims to improve the state of knowledge about FFPT policies. They are doing this by monitoring trends and examples in France and abroad.

The organisation, launched in 2019, aims to highlight objective facts concerning FFPT and move beyond the usual *“for or against”* debate around this mobility policy. Indicators were developed to follow the evolution of the practice in real time, and studies conducted to evaluate the impact of this policy in the various French local authorities where it has been applied.

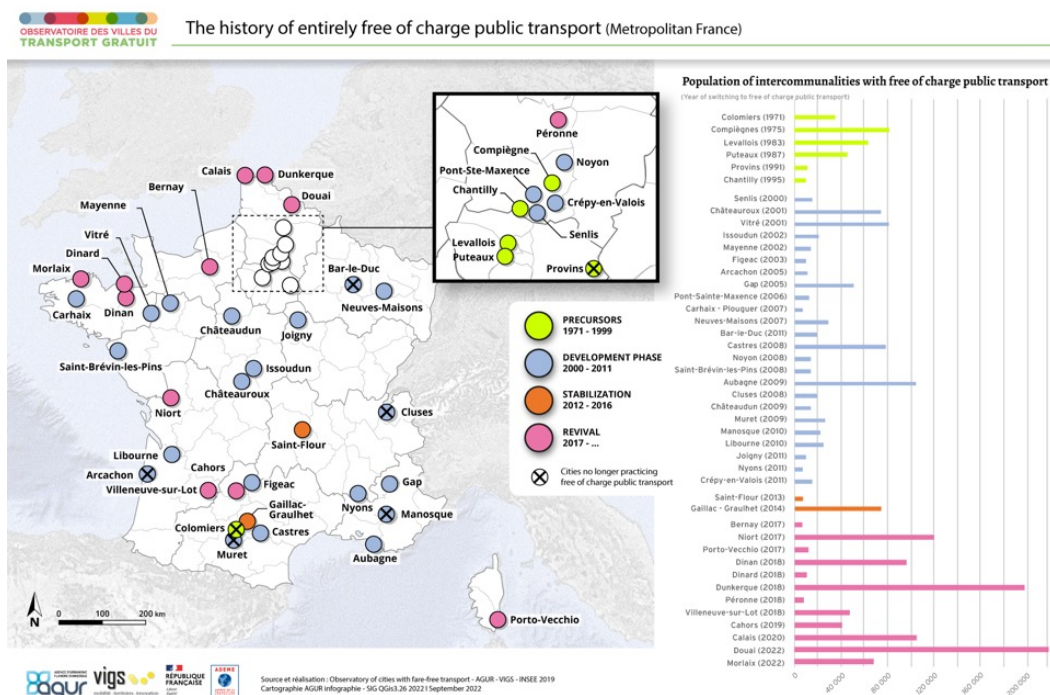
The various faces of “free” public transport

What does “free” mean? The expression “fare-free public transport” includes both uniformly free public transport as well as *selective variants*: only for specific services, times or age groups, only for residents, etc.

Almost 50 years after the implementation of the first free bus network in France (in the south-western city of Colomiers; not in use anymore), FFPT has seen several phases of development and has increased significantly over the past years. As of the beginning of 2023, there were [38 entirely fare-free public transport networks running in France](#).

Contrary to popular belief, cities with more progressive city councils are not more inclined to adopt this kind of policy. In 2023, there are as many progressive French cities as conservative that have adopted a FFPT policy. Surprisingly, even the environment-focused party does not particularly value this public policy. The environmental effects of FFPT, such as modal shift and air quality, are still unclear due to the current lack of accurate assessment methodologies.

Furthermore, while there may be certain barriers to implementing this policy in a large metropolitan area such as Paris (discussed later), the size of the implementation area is not a strict limitation, as shown in the 2023 key-facts from the Observatory sheet (Figure 2).



Source: Observatoire des villes du transport gratuit

Figure 1: Overview of the phased development of FFPT policies within French local authorities of all sizes

Free of charge + Increased level of service = A winning formula

In the perspective of the improving public transport systems, fare-free policy should not be implemented alone but rather in combinations with complementary measures as part of a proactive supply-side policy. In that regard, the successful example of the *Communauté urbaine de Dunkerque* is educational.

At the end of 2018, this local authority in the north of France (comprised of 17 cities and 200,000 inhabitants) transitioned its partially free public transport network into an completely free one. The ridership increased, with a [jump of 85%](#) in the year following the fare-free policy implementation. However, our host, as well as other experts, stressed that the quality of service is key to maintaining this attractiveness and transforming mobility habits over time.

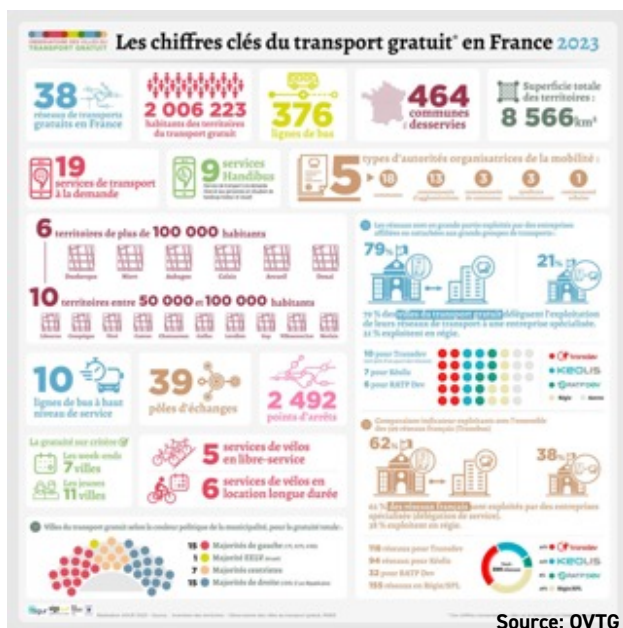


Figure 2: Key-numbers and facts about FFPT networks in France in 2023

As Charles-Eric Lemaigen, vice-president of the GART (*Association of Public Transport Authorities*), [explains](#): “what users want first and foremost is to have buses and trams that correspond to their journeys, with high frequencies and reliable timetables.” If the network is saturated and doesn’t evolve, or if car use remains too attractive, the reduction of the

negative externalities generated by private cars will continue to suffer.

On the other hand, network redesign, new equipment, introduction of lines with high level-of-service (dedicated site), updates to the overall mobility policy (traffic plan, parking plan and pricing, development of active mobility), are examples of measures that have long-term impacts on mobility usage.

In [Dunkerque](#), the elimination of the ticketing system coincided with a rebranding and reorganisation of the public transport network, and the introduction of five Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lanes and significant urban restructuring works in favour of active and collective mobility modes.

Simultaneously, this combination of measures and political choices makes it difficult to accurately assess the scope of impact of FFPT policies. This is something the Observatory is constantly working on in order to present increasingly factual evidence of the efficacy of this type of public policy.

FFPT as a fully-fledge public policy with some already proven effects

As mentioned previously, the most undeniable effect of an FFPT policy is the increase of the ridership, which is influenced by complementing measures. Additional effects such as the reduction of conflicts and increased social safety were highlighted in a [report](#) published by the GART in 2019. These effects can be explained by a better social regulation and enhanced image of the service due to higher number of people in the vehicles, the disappearance of controls, and the presence of mediators.

However, the assessment of the modal shift enabled by FFPT policy is nuanced. The case of Dunkerque taught us that the free network attracts new users to public transport, particularly people that were accustomed to using cars. Still, the topic is far from being settled, and there is currently an academic debate on the methodology for assessment. Additionally,

it appears that there is a real opportunity to increase the synergy between fare-free public transport and bicycle use. [Contrary to a common misconception](#), cyclists support this solution and use it without completely giving up cycling.

Overall, the simplicity of traveling free of charge removes various obstacles to accessing the public transport network, such as understanding of fares, purchasing of tickets, accessing social or solidarity-based fares, and the act of buying tickets. This is especially beneficial for the elderly and young people.

Julie C. summarizes it by saying, *“By erasing the signs of belonging to one social category or another, potentially portrayed by social subscription or the avoidance of bus travel due to lack of resources, it [FFPT policy] creates equality in the face of modal choice.”* This conclusion was drawn from a study focused on the impact of Dunkerque’s FFPT policy on cognitive representations and mobility behaviors among the youth.

FFPT policy also has an influence on the positive public perception of public transport and can lead to increased social diversity on board, as observed in Dunkerque between 2018 and 2019. Furthermore, the younger generation (between 15 and 25 years) in Dunkerque is getting a driving license later, or forgoing it altogether, thanks to the possibility of traveling free of charge. The situation is comparable to the one created by the free public transport subscription for post-secondary students in the Netherlands. As part of their student finance offered by the State, Dutch students can travel for free during weekdays or week-end and at a discounted rate the rest of the time.

FFPT is a viable option... but it may not be suitable everywhere!

When evaluating the cost-benefits balance of a public transport network, we have learned that the revenue from ticket sales (which on average represent 17 % of the total revenue, according to the [study](#) of the GART) barely compensates for the costs of implementing and maintaining the ticketing system. Local public transport authorities have the option to allocate a larger portion of their budget to compensate for this shortfall.

However, this logic does not apply to the specific case of Paris region. In this case, the fees paid by the users contribute significantly, amounting to almost [one third](#) of local public transport authority’s annual income (which totals around €10.5 billion). Moreover, in the context of already congested networks, such as those found in metropolitan areas, implementing a FFPT policy and its previously mentioned impact on ridership could be counterproductive. Therefore, the national association GART does not promote universal implementation of FFPT but instead supports a case-by-case approach. Nevertheless, as more and more municipalities implement this public policy, it forces us to consider it as a serious option.

It will be interesting to observe in the coming years whether this growing trend in France will continue, particularly in a country where individual motorised traffic still dominates the average modal split. Additionally, it will be important to assess the long-term impact on the current young generation in terms of their adoption of car-free mobility practices and whether they will transmit these practices to the next generation.

Want to know more about this topic? Then feel free to get in touch.

The intervention from the Observatoire des villes du transport gratuit was part of a 3-day study tour organised by Forseti and Mobycon. If you would like to know more about the possibilities for a tailor-made study tour for your team or organisation, please [contact us!](#)